

Communion Preparatory Service

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Preacher: Rev. Colin F. Macleod

[0 : 0 0] Well, if you turn with me in your Bibles to the Gospel of John and chapter 20, our time this evening together, I'd like us just to consider these, the words we find particularly in verse 20, but of course perhaps in their setting, in this unidentified room where the disciples, the followers of Jesus, were gathered together, that Jesus came to them and stood among them. And then in verse 20, when he had said, this and said, peace be with you, he showed them his hands on his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

It's quite exhilarating to read this passage when we think of the events we look back on with some 2,000 years of time, we were allowed to discern what's happening, but the exhilaration comes from putting ourselves into the shoes of the disciples and the followers of Jesus and learning from them and listening to what Jesus said and what Jesus did to affirm and confirm in their hearts who he is and the significance of what had happened on the cross and, of course, his resurrection.

We join the passage here in verse 19 in John 20. It's the Sunday in the evening of that day, the first day of the week. And as we piece things together from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it would seem to be quite late now in the evening. And we find the disciples shattered.

They're hiding away. We don't avoid that. Yes, that's true. We'll come back to that in a minute. But they're trying to process what's happened. They're trying to come to terms with what's going on.

Not just what happened on Golgotha, but what's been happening since early that morning. And what has been happening? Well, a group of their women have come back from the tomb where Jesus was buried.

[2 : 0 0] They're excited. They're thrilled. There's a buzz in the air. They're so enthused because they're speaking about angels. They're speaking of angelic encounters and conversing with the messengers of heaven. And then Peter and John, they've been to the tomb. They've been inside the tomb. They've confirmed to the group, it is indeed empty. What's going on? And then in verse 18, we read that Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord. Now, this is amazing. This is incredible. And it's little wonder that we find them together. Isn't that wonderful? Not only have Peter and John been inside the tomb, but Mary Magdalene has announced she has seen the Lord by now. Peter and John have been inside the tomb. We can piece things together. Peter himself will have seen the Lord and met with him. The women are recounting the angelic encounter they had. The two will also have returned from Emmaus by this time, because Luke tells us in his account of the same incident in Luke's gospel and in chapter 24, that as they were speaking about these things,

Luke 24 and verse 36, they've come back from the road to Emmaus. Cleopas, well, I believe it was Cleopas and his wife Mary who were on the road to Emmaus. They've come back. They're amongst the group there. And as they were talking about what's happened with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus himself stood among them and said, peace to you. But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. Why? Because they knew he had been killed on the cross. They knew he had died. They knew he had been buried. And now here he is standing in front of them. Jesus has risen. Now, maybe it's a bad sign.

The emphasis we have here in John that they were together, the doors being locked for fear of the Jews. But I think we need to be very careful and uncritical when we read things like this.

Way back in John chapter 5, at the very outside of John's account of the life and ministry of Jesus, we read that the Jews were seeking to kill him. We're now post-Calvary. They have succeeded in a mission. The Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the day, they have executed Jesus, publicly, and they have seen him slaughtered on the cross. They have job done as far as they're concerned. It's little wonder the disciples were meeting together behind locked doors, because for all they knew, that door could burst open in a moment. They could be next on the list. So I think the fear is understandable, and we needn't be too critical of them. I doubt very much any of us would have been any different. But I do think that in what happens next in John 20, we have a fulfillment of what we read of in John 16 and verse 20, where Jesus said to the disciples, in the upper room, remember, truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice.

You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. I believe the fulfillment of that is here before us in John chapter 20. So I'd just like to think about two main things with you this evening, in terms of a preparation service, with a view to the table being set and the invitation being offered in Jesus' name to come to that table. I'd like us to look at what happened in that room that night, late in that first Sunday evening, when Jesus came to his people. We find two things. We find reassurance from Christ, and we find a response to Christ. Reassurance from Christ and the response to Christ. Notice in this reassurance, on the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, peace be with you. So the reassurance that comes from Christ comes first of all in what he said to them, peace be with you. He says it twice in this incident, and then eight days later, when Thomas is with them this time, and Jesus comes in among them again, again, the first thing he says there in verse 26, peace be with you. So three times we find this emphasis being on Jesus, and what he said to his people begins with a wonderful word, peace. Peace be with you.

[6 : 47] I don't think we should be surprised by that. I think we should rejoice in it, because what they needed most of all was to still their hearts and minds, was it not? They've gathered for fear of the Jews. They've had the woman speaking of the angels. They've had Mary Magdalene announcing, I have seen the Lord. They've had Cleopas and his wife come back from the road to Emmaus, saying too, we have seen the Lord. And they're struggling to take it in, because we know in Luke, when the stories begin to come back from the empty tomb that Jesus has risen, that they seemed to them as fables, and they did not believe them. They've had three years in intimate communion with Christ, seeing him up close and personal more than anyone else on earth. And still, they wouldn't believe the stories that Jesus had risen from the grave, though he prepared them again and again and again. And we know they were described as being slow of heart or hard of heart and slow to believe.

That what they needed most of all now was this peace, peace of heart and mind, to think and to pray. And it's as we think and pray and experience peace of heart, what happens is we remember and we trust.

And these two characteristics are crucial in our Christian experience, remembering the Lord and trusting in the Lord. One of the greatest verses in the Bible, trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. We need peace for that to happen, because sometimes we get wound up, we get buffeted, we get mixed up, we get confused, we sin, we fail, we fall down, and we can lose our focus and lose our perspective, and we can forget the promises of God, the promise of Christ. I will be with you always. You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

This is the word of God that brings us into communion with the God of the word. And it gets greater than just being our justification, as amazing as that is. The gospel is more than that, it's better than that, it's greater and more glorious than that, because not only are we justified, we are adopted. Who is? Who's this we? Children of God, sinners who have come in faith to Christ for forgiveness and cleansing. And so they needed peace. They needed to remember and trust, remember his teaching, remember how Jesus dealt with Kropos on the road to Emmaus, that he took them to the scripture. And he showed them that these things needs be, that the Christ must suffer and die and rise again. And their hearts burned within them as the pieces began to join together. And they recognized him in the breaking of bread. Peace be with you. What a wonderful greeting it is. It was a standard, common, daily greeting among the Jewish people at that time. What a wonderful thing to wish to one another as we meet. Peace be with you. And Jesus comes at this crucial time where things are so tense and there's such uncertainty, and as we're going to see in a minute, doubt. And he says, peace. Isaiah 26 says, you will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is fixed on you because they trust in you. We fix our minds on Christ. We trust in Christ. And there's that wonderful declaration, in Romans in chapter 5. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But there's locked doors here. Let's look at that for a moment.

They were intimidated. They were uncertain. They were afraid. I've been there. I'm sure many of you have as well. That feeling of being completely isolated as a Christian, that no one else could give two hoots about the Bible, the gospel, and they're ready to rip you to death and mock you and make fun of you because you're a Christian. We've probably all been there. What's going on here? I think it's quite clear that the channel of their faith was cluttered by doubts. Look at Thomas, what he would say eight days later, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side. I will never believe. Now, Thomas was with them. He was not with them when Jesus came. And what did the others say? They've borne testimony. They've preached the gospel to him. We have seen the Lord. What's Thomas' reply? I will never believe.

[11:30] Let's just pause for a second and take note of this, that Thomas missed out because he wasn't there. In chapter 20, verse 19, we're told that they were together. But Thomas isn't there. I don't know why. I don't know where he was. All we know is that he wasn't there. And so he missed meeting with the Lord. There's a lesson there for us, friends. If you love the Lord Jesus Christ, if you're trusting in him for the forgiveness of your sin and your eternal salvation, be sure to be at his table in the Lord's day. That's where he wants you. That's where you belong. And Jesus says to everyone who trusts and loves him, come, for all things are now ready. So Thomas missed out. Friends, don't miss out by not being at the table of your Lord this coming Lord's day. But what happened, you see, is the channel of the faith was cluttered by doubts. Luke chapter 24 and verse 11. Again, it is very helpful to us as we put the two parallel passages beside each other. Chapter 24 and verse 11 says,

These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. This is evidence of the destructive nature of doubt. Doubt. Often as Christians, we get it the wrong way around.

We doubt our beliefs, and we believe our doubts. Don't we do that? Do we get it wrong? We get mixed up, and we can be so buffeted by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Intolerance, apathy, secularism, atheism, all these things that are pouring in against the church in our day and age. And sometimes we can get knocked off course and left, knocked sideways by things. And sometimes doubts can arise.

I was reading the other day about Winston Churchill, a very famous quote that Churchill once came out with. He was being interviewed, I think, toward the end of the Second World War as to what he thought of Russia and Russia's intentions and what Russia was going to do. And in his reply, it went down in history. He said of Russia, I do not know Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

He was a wordsmith, of course. He just looked at Russia and saw one giant question mark. He didn't know what to make of them. He was full of doubt. And I know what a communion season is. You know, Christian friend, that one thing the devil will want to fan into flame in our hearts are doubts. He wants us to doubt ourselves, to doubt our salvation, to doubt our right to be at the table, to doubt that we really have been born again, to doubt the church, to doubt the gospel, to doubt the Bible. He wants us full of doubt. Because if we're full of doubt, we're of less use to the Lord, our maker. Martin Luther said this, he said that we must avoid the art of doubting. See, he described it so accurately. We must avoid the art of doubting, for it is an ability we are born with. Isn't that interesting? It is an ability we are born with. We all have it. And sadly, at times, we fall victim to our doubts. We doubt our beliefs, and we believe our beliefs. And I remind you of Pilgrim's Progress, Bunyan's classic work. Who was it that lived in Doubting Castle? Giant despair. That's where he was. That's where he lived, full of despair, full of anguish, because he was full of doubt. And again, just to turn back to Luke's gospel, and chapter 24, and verse 38. Listen to these words, what Jesus said to them when he appeared to his disciples. This is Luke's account of what we've read in John's gospel. Jesus said to them, why are you troubled? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? He saw their doubt. He saw their uncertainty. He saw their fragility. And he said, peace be with you. So, in what he said, there's reassurance. But there's also, in what he showed to them, there's reassurance. Having spoken to them, having said, peace be with you, Jesus showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

[16 : 11] Now there's the breakthrough. What happens here? You see, he shows them his hands, and he shows them his side. He shows them the wounds inflicted on his body by what he experienced on the cross.

This is conclusive proof to the room. It was him. It's both confirmation of his death and declaration of his resurrection. Here is our Savior, who was dead and now is alive. There's that wonderful passage in 1 Corinthians 15. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The victory, friends, is ours, won by Jesus, secured by Jesus. In Christ alone, our hope is found.

He is the rock. He is our fortress. He is our Savior. He is our Redeemer because of who he is and what he did and what he went through and experienced on the cross, we know that our Redeemer lives.

And so we have this room transformed. And what we see is the disciples being brought from the shadows of uncertainty and unbelief and hardness of heart and being afraid and being intimidated.

[17 : 32] And there's a transformation. We see it eight days later as well. And it takes place in the heart of Thomas when Jesus said to him in verse 27, Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands. Put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe. And Thomas answered him, my Lord and my God. And in these precious words, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. That's us, friends. That's us. And we go to the table on Friday and Sunday in order to profess that belief and express our faith and declare our love for Jesus. So there's reassurance here. Secondly, that's the reassurance from Jesus. But there's, and what happens here in the disciples' hearts, we see a response to Jesus. And these words are wonderful.

Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. And I remember reading somewhere that it's right to be dignified in worship, but it's unforgivable to be dull. I like that statement. It stuck with me for through the years. Sometimes, Christian friends, we get it wrong there. People may look at us and see dullness. They might see formality. They might see something that to them expresses or it looks a bit heavy, a bit off-putting. My word, how could it be off-putting? How could we be off-putting to those around us who don't know Jesus? That's something sometimes again. We could get wrong. We need to be very careful here. And I think what happens in the disciples' response to Jesus helps us to just make sure we're on the right track and we get the perspective right. The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Now that word there, glad, is very interesting. It's in the original Greek. It's a word that emphasizes to rejoice, to delight in. It's a word in the original that's very closely linked. It comes from the exact same root as words for joy and grace. Isn't that wonderful? Where there is grace, there is joy. And that's what we find here.

The grace of Christ brings joy into that room. Then they were glad when they saw the Lord. Matthew chapter 2 has the same word, whereas here the ESV gives it quite well. I guess we don't call it the extremely safe version for nothing. And there we are. They're saying they were glad when they saw the Lord.

Most translations translate that as they were full of joy or they rejoiced. It's the same word in Matthew 2 for how the wise men reacted when they saw the star stop above the stable. They rejoiced greatly. And here we have the disciples in this moment of recognition and acknowledgement and understanding, rejoicing. What's happening here? Something's happened in their heart. The doubts have drained away. Their hearts are now full with joy and relief and thanksgiving because they saw the Lord.

They saw the Lord. And this tells us something. This tells us something. Their response to Jesus tells us fundamentally this. They loved him. They loved him. The heartbeat of the Christian life is a love for Christ. A love for Christ. This is what molds our decision making, fuels our sense of purpose, and explains our actions because we love the Lord. We love him and we lean on him, and we live for him. And we do these things because we love him. It's a circle. Circular action. We love the Lord. And so we live in a way that is to be explained and understood. This love is at the center. People in your family circles, your work colleagues, your friends, your pals out there on social media, they may wonder where you are this evening. Or maybe they know. Maybe they know you're in church tonight, a preparatory service in Barvis. And they wouldn't be one bit surprised because they know you love the Lord. And that's a great thing. That itself is a testimony. It is a light shining in the darkness that you love Jesus Christ. And you will be here tonight for, to be with his people, to worship together in the beauty of holiness, to acknowledge the greatness of God, and to give thanks for the grace of the gospel. And together you rejoice to see Jesus. The disciples were glad when they saw the

[22 : 32] Lord. I think we should understand that reference not just to the ten, but to the extended group. The wives, the women, the followers of Jesus. We don't know where they were. We don't know how many there were, but there was a sizable group. And in the hearts of that group, in every one of them, there was joy. Apart from one. Thomas. Because he wasn't there. Come back to it again, friends.

He missed out. He wasn't where he could have been. We don't know where he was. Let's not point the fingers and make up theories. All we know is he missed out because he wasn't there. He didn't have this experience until eight days later, when in God's grace and providence, he was given the opportunity again to be in fellowship. And this time he was. So can I just gently underline again, if you love the Lord, if you've come to him for the forgiveness of your sin, if you have in your heart a desire to honour him, to worship him, to live for him day by day, be sure to be at his table this coming Lord's day, to meet with him, to be nourished by him, to feed on him in faith. We go there, as Murdo has already said, because we're sinners, saved by grace. And we need his grace every single day. And at the table he has for us, a feast, a special feast, a specific feast of remembrance, where we express our obedience, we declare the Lord's death when he comes. And as we do that, as we pass the bread, and as we pass the wine, we are saying, I love the Lord. And that's what we find here in this response.

They were glad, glad when they saw the Lord. Let me read to you that wonderful passage from Ephesians in chapter 3. And toward the end of that wonderful chapter, this prayer for spiritual strength.

Listen to what the apostle prays for Christians here. He prays that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him he was able to do far more abundantly than what we ask or think according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church in Christ Jesus, through all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Paul prayed that they would comprehend the love of Christ, that they would be rooted and grounded in love for Christ. And that's what we see here. They were glad. They rejoiced. And they rejoiced because of grace, there's this wonderful linkage. There's grace, there's joy. Where there's joy, there's grace.

[25 : 44] And it's all emanating from and looked into, flows from and goes back to Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Saviour and our friend. And so if we respond like they did, there will be an impact. Things will change.

Doubt will be driven away and our hearts will be full of a love for the Lord. And that also will have a further impact that we will determine to walk in a manner that is worthy of the calling with which we have been called. And that's what we find described later in Ephesians, where Paul would say that we are to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice to God.

Friends, this love finds its way to being expressed in many ways. But these many different ways would all express it perhaps differently in our gifts, in our times, in the abilities that we have in the circumstances. We find ourselves, according to God's providence, we'll express our love for Jesus differently, yes. But we must remember it is the primary fruit of the Holy Spirit we're talking about here. And this love will find a way to express itself. It will be expressed in commitment to him, dependence on him, and obedience. Faith is the root, obedience is the fruit. And the more we love Christ, the more determined we will be to obey him, to honour him, to follow him every single day.

And so we remember that the sacrament, the Lord's Supper, it is at heart a table where we feed by faith, but we go on obedience, simple obedience, to express our love for Christ, to exercise and expand our understanding in our hearts, and to grow and develop and nurture this fruit of the Spirit, which is love. Remember the Galatians 5 list, you'll know it well, I know. The fruit of the Spirit is, where does he begin? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All these things flow through the heart of the believer. The eminent from him perhaps are wrapped up in love. Love for Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. And so we give thanks tonight for an incredible saviour. There's no other message in the world, there's no other religion in the world that comes close to this. A redeemer, a saviour, a king who is truly God and truly man, dead upon a cross for us. He was bruised for our iniquities. And there's that incredible statement in Galatians, he became a curse for us. We in a lifetime will never plumb the depths of that statement. We will study till our dying day and we'll never exhaust the emphasis and teaching of that.

He became a curse for us. And now says to us what? Come, for all things are now ready.

[29 : 11] Do this in remembrance of me. This primary fruit of the Holy Spirit is the characteristic most emphasized by Christ in the upper room. You turn back a few chapters in your Bibles to John in chapter 13, and you read there in verses 34 and 35, the teaching of Jesus the night before he was betrayed.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another. What an emphasis to make the night he was betrayed. And now here we find Jesus coming and standing among them, peace be with you. And that reassurance brings a wonderful response. They were glad when they saw the Lord. And that gladness speaks of a love for Christ. It is displayed here then in this response. That reality is what you will testify to at the table if you are there. That you love the Lord. What marks our steps to the table, what steadies us to go there, is our love for him, our desire to honour him, and a longing to obey him, to do this in remembrance of me.

I close with the words of the hymn writer who said, I love thee because thou first loved me, and purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree. I love thee for wearing the thorns on thy brow.

If ever I loved thee, my Jesus. It is now. May the Lord bless you and keep you and nourish you and feed you as you gather at his table on the Lord's day. As they were together with the Lord, so you will be together with the Lord at his table, where he delights in fellowship and communion with his people, as together in faith and in love, you remember his death till he come again. Let's pray for a moment together. Lord, our God be with us tonight. We thank you that we can spend some time together around your word, and we see the early church shattered and intimidated and afraid, but together.

And may we take that example, Lord, and be together as often as we can. We pray, Lord, for your people here. Bless them, Lord, under your word and by sacrament in days to come. May they know a great harvest of holiness. May they know a blessing in their souls as they commune together and share in the supper of the Lord, looking to him in faith. Be with us, Lord, as we express in days ahead our love for Christ. In this we ask in his precious name. Amen.

[32 : 19] Now we'll close our service this evening. We'll turn and sing psalms to Psalm 28. Psalm 28. We'll sing from verse 6 in Psalm 28. We'll sing from verse 6 to the end of the psalm.

Praise to the Lord, for he has heard the plea for mercy which I made. He is my strength. He is my shield. I trust in him who sends me aid. Psalm 28 from verse 6. We'll sing to the end to the praise of God.

Psalm 28. We'll sing to the Lord, for he has heard the plea for mercy which I made. He is my strength. He is my shield.

I trust in him who sends me aid. My heart uplifted leads for joy. My thanks to him I gladly sing.

The Lord God is his people's strength. A saving fortress for his kin.

[34 : 06] Lord, save your people, your own foe. Be pleased, your heritage to bless. Be their good shepherd.

Carry them forever in your faithfulness.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the Father, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.